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Mugabe Gets Tougher

Zimbabwe is on the way to becoming an authoritarian state under Prime Minister Robert Mugabe, a self-proclaimed Marxist. Opponents are jailed, the press is muzzled and the population is cowed by Mugabe's special military units and the young toughs of his Youth Brigade.

Mugabe came to power through the Zimbabwe African National Union, which was founded in 1963 by the Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole, with Mugabe as his secretary. Both men were imprisoned by Ian Smith's white regime in 1964 and spent 10 years in confinement.

In the election that followed the guerrilla war, Bishop Abel Muzorewa of the United Methodist Church was elected the country's first black prime minister in 1979. Sithole ran second. But less than a year later, new elections were held and Mugabe won by a landslide. He pledged to seek reconciliation with his political opponents. Instead, he dumped Muzorewa in prison and hounded his former mentor, Sithole.

Not long ago, Sithole made an unpublicized trip to Washington in search of financial and political aid to oppose the Mugabe regime. My associate, Dale Van Atta, learned of Sithole's visit and slipped in to see him.

Sithole fears that Mugabe is determined to achieve a one-party state, with himself as dictator. "The situation is worsening there," he said. "Since independence, we have been living under a declared state of emergency. Normal rights have been suspended."

He claims that Mugabe is using the state of emergency to solidify his personal power. Opponents are jailed or harassed. Opposition parties are not allowed on television or radio. Speeches, rallies and other events must have Mugabe's approval or they go unreported. The press, meanwhile, has been turned into a propaganda machine for Mugabe.

Intelligence reports say he has also organized his own private army to undercut the British-trained regular army, which he doesn't trust. A third of the regular army is made up of Ndebele tribesmen, traditional enemies of the majority Shona tribe, of which Mugabe is a member.

So Mugabe brought in foreign advisers to help him create a separate army that is personally loyal to him. Some sources estimate the number of foreign advisers as high as 6,000 Chinese, 4,000 North Koreans and several hundred Cubans.

"The Chinese recognize that so far as the Sino-Soviet rivalry for long-term influence in southern Africa is concerned, the stakes in Zimbabwe are much higher than in Angola," a secret CIA analysis points out.

The infamous Fifth Brigade was trained by the North Koreans. That was the Shona-dominated outfit that slaughtered hundreds of unarmed Ndebele tribesmen in a sweep through their territory a year ago.

In addition, Mugabe has been building up his own People's Militia, a Sixth Brigade and a special constabulary that works closely with his intelligence apparatus. It is regarded by opposition leaders as the greatest threat because, as one explained, "they are everywhere, and you don't know who they are."

My Zimbabwean sources are also thoroughly alarmed by Mugabe's Youth Brigade. Its young troopers, aged 14 to 18, are taught loyalty to Mugabe and are expected to report any suspicions they may have about their own families.

The Youth Brigade recruits are trained by Chinese and North Korean advisers. The reports of their activities are disturbing. Last August, for example, 2,000 Youth Brigade toughs disrupted Sunday services at the Methodist church in Mutare, throwing stones through the windows and forcing the worshipers out into the street. The young thugs then set fire to the church members' cars, gathered up all the Bibles from the church and made a bonfire of them.

Local police arrested some of the miscreants, but the government ordered their release. So far, the civilian police remain outside Mugabe's control, but they are rapidly becoming demoralized. "The main function of the Youth Brigade is to inspire fear," said one of Sithole's associates. "Fear is very real. It has become a national problem."

Footnote: Sithole was planning to return to Harare, the Zimbabwean capital, when he left Washington. But he got word that he would be arrested the moment his plane landed. So he is now in self-imposed exile in London.